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ABSTRACT

Ethnicity in the American context involves two components: the cultural component and the "outsider" component. The first consists of those customs, folkways, rituals, and values identified with a particular ethnic group and its unique patterns of living. The second is the feeling of being outside the mainstream politically, economically, socially, or psychologically. This feeling is undeniably part of the American ethnic experience, especially for black Americans. The feeling of outsidedness dominated black American fiction from the Civil War through the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's and the protest movement which followed. The works of the black authors Charles Chesnutt, Claude McKay, and Richard Wright reflected this feeling. In the 1950's, however, black writers such as Ralph Ellison came to accept their culture as valid and began to universalize themes, and to show the connections between black life and life in general. These themes continue to be developed today by such writers as Toni Morrison and Al Young. The outsider component of ethnicity in black writing, by itself, is not a sufficient focus to support a broad and varied cultural literature. (Author/NC)

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Ethnicity in Black American Fiction

To make a poet black,
and bid him sing!

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Shelby Steele

IT seems to me that ethnicity in the American context involves two components: a cultural component and what I will call the "outsider" component. The cultural component consists of those customs, folkways, rituals, and values identified with a particular ethnic group and the patterns of living unique to the group. Ethnicity and culture are often considered synonymous, both referring to the shared lifestyle of a social group. But it is impossible to think of ethnicity in America without recognizing the alienation that members of ethnic groups experience. Alienation is certainly far less severe for some groups than for others, but in America it is common to the heritage of them all. The feeling of being outside the mainstream politically, economically, socially, or psychologically is an undeniable part of the American ethnic experience. For black Americans, with little possibility of assimilation, the experience of outsidedness has been particularly severe and has had a significant impact on the development of black American fiction.

Most good writers instinctively use their cultural backgrounds in their works whether they come from an ethnic, regional, or national culture. Culture speaks to the rituals and forms life takes, the ways individuals and

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groups play out their lives. The substance of life may be universal, but the forms the substance takes necessarily vary from one cultural setting to another. Thus, Faulkner uses the folkways of rural Mississippi, Joyce those of Catholic Ireland and Langston Hughes those of Harlem. A specific cultural setting contributes to the sense of reality their work tries to create. But one factor makes this possible for them: the belief that their own culture is as valid an expression of the human condition as any other -- in a word, self-acceptance. This is an extremely important belief because it allows them to move from a point of strength rather than weakness. They can be relaxed and objective, free of self doubt or feelings of inferiority. Believing in the fundamental humanity of their own cultural group, they can see in its very uniqueness that which is universal. The result, in the work of good novelists, is fiction that has universal appeal yet is richly grounded in specific cultural detail.

But what of the ethnic writer whose ethnic group is so intensely oppressed that the very value of his culture is questioned, where in some quarters even his humanity is questioned? For this writer, there can be no feeling of security regarding his background. His ethnicity itself is at issue so that he must be forever explaining, justifying, and defending it. He must answer charges that exist outside what he might like his work to be. As an artist he is distracted; his energies are diffused. For writers in this situation, it is usually the outsider component of ethnicity that becomes their first concern. With survival at stake, there is no time to render the nuances of one's culture into literature. There is little time even to recognize one's culture. It is hard to see anything beyond one's outsidedness.

Until very recently, black American fiction writers found themselves in this position. As Countee Cullen put it in his famous poem, "Yet I do marvel at this curious thing: To make a poet black, and bid him sing!"[1] The irony of this line lies in the equation of blackness with suffering and alienation, with outsidedness. No connotation of culture attaches to the word "black." Until the 1950's, this one dimensional view of ethnicity as outsidedness dominated the development of black American fiction. Even in the Harlem Renaissance when black writers spoke extensively of black culture, there was still an overriding preoccupation with the alienation and outsidedness of the black experience. This preoccupation has had an important effect on the development of black American fiction.

After the Civil War, a black middle class composed largely of former house slaves and freed blacks began to emerge in America for the first time. Later they were labeled the "Talented Tenth" by W.E.B. Dubois. Their strategy for survival in a racist society was simply to assimilate. They sought to separate themselves from the black masses by identifying themselves with the most conservative traditions of Western culture. They were genteel in their manners and Calvinistic in their ethics. Hard work, sexual repression, Victorian manners, and rigid standards of propriety were their norm. Their goal was to convince upper class whites that they could be just like them, except for

color. Whites would then see the irrationality of their racism and grant equality to this "exceptional" class of blacks. As Robert Bone says, "They were trying to breach caste with class."[2] Implicit in their strategy was the complete denial of black culture.

Many of the first black fiction writers emerged from this class, and often their work expressed the Talented Tenth's aspirations in both theme and style. Charles Chesnutt and Paul Laurence Dunbar are the two best known writers of this period (1890-1910). Chesnutt's novel, ***House Behind the Cedars***, shows thematically and stylistically an allegiance to the Talented Tenth. The central plot device of this novel is called the tragic mullato motif, which was a very popular device among the early assimilationist black writers. The novel's heroine, Rena, is of light enough complexion to pass for white and is extremely beautiful. Her older brother, who has already passed and become a prominent "white" lawyer in a far off town, takes her away from their obviously black mother and educates her in an exclusive finishing school for young southern women. She becomes the essence of southern refinement. "Her graceful movements, the quiet elegance with which she wore even the simplest gown, the easy authoritiveness with which she directed the servants . . . proofs of superior quality."[3] Significantly, the author elsewhere suggests that her beauty matches the ancient Greek standard. The next inevitable step is that George Tryon, the son of a wealthy and prominent southern family, falls in love with her and proposes marriage. But, as always happens in the tragic mullato motif, the secret of her race is discovered on the eve of her marriage. From this point on there is only tragedy. Rejected by Tryon, Rena goes back to her mother, teaches school for a while but now feels even more out of place among blacks than she had among whites. The end, like most of what goes before, is strongly melodramatic. Just as Tryon finally decides that love is more important than anything else and that he will marry her, she dies of brain fever.

Though the story is hardly tragic for the modern reader, Chesnutt's intention was that it be so. The tragedy for Chesnutt is that this girl who, like the talented tenth generally, has mastered every nuance of white culture is purged from it because of that infamous single drop of black blood. Chesnutt clearly intends the novel to work as a protest against the unfairness of caste distinctions as opposed to class distinctions.

Other characteristics also indicated the closeness of the assimilationist writers with the spirit of the Talented Tenth. Both Chesnutt and Dunbar wrote in an ornate Victorian prose style that was outdated even in their own time. And Dunbar wrote more than one novel with only white characters. Even his autobiographical novel, ***The Uncalled***, had only white characters. Though racial disguise was often required by publishers, ethnicity for these writers had nothing whatever to do with culture. It had only to do with the position of blacks as outsiders in American society. Their work sought to expose the irrationality of this and very little else. They blindly accepted

Western culture and neglected their own, refusing to recognize that their own people had by this time developed an Afro-American culture of great importance.

The next important movement in black fiction was hardly assimilationist. The period from 1920 to 1930, known as the Harlem Renaissance, saw black writers reject assimilation and the values of the Talented Tenth for what they called cultural duality and racial pride. There is no question but that the writers of this period were deeply interested in their ethnicity from a cultural point of view. They felt that the strategy of assimilation was futile and demeaning in its denial of self. They rejected the Talented Tenth and identified with the black masses and the way of life they represented. In place of a repressive Calvinistic ethical system, they espoused a freer morality based on love, spontaneity, and uninhibited emotions. They rejected the work ethic and reavowed their ancestral ties to Africa. Their expressed purpose was to reaffirm the beauty and richness of Afro-American culture.

In this sense the Harlem Renaissance seems to contradict my thesis that black fiction only recently began to express the cultural component of ethnicity. And to an extent this is quite true. They were the first group of black writers to see not only the value of their own culture but also to understand its literary possibilities. But on closer examination it is clear that in the fiction of this period the outsider component is still the dominant force. This gets us into the hard-to-prove area of motives. My feeling is that the Harlem Renaissance was born as much out of an impulse to react against the assimilationist stance of the Talented Tenth as it was out of any desire to celebrate black American culture for its own sake. Most of these writers were the sons and daughters of the rising black middle class, and as Robert Bone says, "In psychological terms, they were rebelling against their fathers and their father's way of life."[4] The celebration of black culture was often a means of rebelling against the duplicity and self debasement they perceived in the black middle class and the racist stereotypes of blacks that came from white America. So again, much of the fiction of this movement was concerned with the *external* issue of black culture. There was celebration but it was pointed celebration, often defensive and frequently chauvinistic. The writer's perceptions of his culture had to be maneuvered into a fictional world that supported his need to react. Beneath his new found concern for his culture was the same problem of his outsidedness pulling him away from cultural celebration into polemics.

The strategy of much of the fiction of this period involved embracing the stereotypes of blacks that racist whites had always put forth, but treating them positively rather than negatively. The lazy, shiftless negro became a kind of hero who responded to the spontaneous urgings of his own heart rather than the boss' time clock. The low-life blues singer became a sensitive artist, and the woman of loose morals became a woman in tune with the natural needs of her own body. Conversely, blacks or whites who showed loyalty to middle-class values were seen as frigid, repressed, and sterile. The

lines were clearly drawn. The heroes and heroines were low-life, their adversaries middle class. There was also the general feeling that rural life was more natural and better for blacks than the fast-paced urban life.

Many of these themes are present in the novel ***Banjo*** by Claude McKay. The hero, Banjo, is a black vagabond who travels the world on tramp steamers working only enough to support himself. He is the typical Renaissance hero. He is guided in life by his feelings alone and is completely uninterested in the trappings of civilization. As his name suggests, he is a masterful banjo player in the southern blues style. (This links him both with black music, which also went through a renaissance during this period, and with southern rural roots.) Ray, who is Banjo's intellectual counterpart in the novel, admires in him all the qualities the Harlem Renaissance represented. Ray would like to be as free as Banjo but his intellectuality inhibits him. As Banjo tells him, "Youse a book fellah and you' mind might tell you to do one thing and them books persweahs you to do another."[5]

The relationship between Banjo and Ray reveals the central weakness in the novel and, on a broader level, the fiction of the Harlem Renaissance. Ray, the intellectual, the writer, places himself in an almost worshipful relationship with Banjo, the poor, black mass man. He becomes the novel's publicist, forever justifying and explaining Banjo's behavior in accordance with the themes of the Harlem Renaissance. Often he does this at his own expense, "The more Ray mixed in the rude anarchy of the lives of the black boys – loafing, singing, bumming, playing, dancing, loving, working – and came to the realization of how close-linked he was to them in spirit, the more he felt that they represented more than he or the cultured minority the irrepressible exuberance and legendary vitality of the black race."[6] McKay's goal, through Ray, is not a simple appreciation of black culture; it is to present black culture as an antidote to the sterility of the Talented Tenth and the racism of white America. Culture in this novel is reduced to a polemical tool. In the end Banjo escapes the repressive hand of the authorities and continues to live life on his own terms. The irrepressibly human wins out over the system. But it is all too neat and Banjo becomes the stuff of legend rather than realistic fiction.

The dominance of the outsider component of ethnicity is even more clear in the protest movement in black fiction that followed the Harlem Renaissance. Protest had always played a part in black fiction but from the late thirties to the early fifties it was the dominant mode of black writing. The dean of protest fiction in America was Richard Wright and he, along with others like Chester Himes, Ann Petry and William Gardener Smith became known as the Wright School. The first purpose of their fiction was to protest the unjust social conditions blacks live under in America. They were unequivocal in this. All else was secondary. Their formative years were during the Depression and, like many writers during this period, they were involved with the Communist Party – Wright more deeply than the others. So the times in which they lived, their exposure to socialist ideas and, in some cases,

a personal background of poverty and deprivation combined to make them the most socially conscious group of black writers that had yet appeared.

The protest writers responded exclusively to the outsider component of their ethnicity. Protest fiction is an exploration of the outsidedness of the ethnic hero combined with an attempt to motivate the reader toward social change. To dwell on what was beautiful and enduring in the culture could diffuse the protest. The reader might say, "Oh, that's touching. They're not so bad off after all." So the black protest writer was trapped by his own motives into showing how painful and tragic the black experience was, how bad it all was. To achieve this he had to make his heroes helpless victims, men who were defeated by a racist and unjust society. Though this met the immediate requirements of protest, it ultimately led to an image of blacks, as people, that was far from complimentary. If one saw the heroes of these novels as representative, blacks came off looking desperate, weak and mentally inferior. Thus the black protest writer was caught in an irony: in his demand for equality there was an indirect admission of inferiority. This irony, born of an exclusive concern with outsidedness, characterized the fiction of the protest period.

Wright's famous novel ***Native Son*** is an example. The hero, Bigger Thomas, is made savage by a harsh ghetto background. Wright makes every effort to show the hopelessness and deprivation of his environment so that when he finally murders the white girl, Mary Dalton, we see that he is driven to it by this environment. His family and friends are seen as backward and bitter, his mother relying on Christianity as an opiate, his friends plotting hopeless small-time robberies to survive. Except for the distant admiration of his younger brother, there is little love within his family. What love he shares with his girlfriend, Bessie, ends when the pressures of his flight from the police drive him to murder her. In the course of the novel, there is hardly one positive image of black life.

Native Son is a novel without much of a cultural setting. Wright's intention was to register "the horror of negro life in the United States." This he certainly achieves, but finally this view is glaringly onesided, for there must be more to black life than horror. In his autobiography, ***Black Boy***, Wright makes a very telling comment. "Whenever I thought of the essential bleakness of black life in America, I knew that Negroes had never been allowed to catch the full spirit of Western civilization, that they lived somehow in it but not of it. And when I brooded upon the cultural barrenness of black life, I wondered if clean, positive tenderness, love, honor, loyalty and the capacity to remember was native with man."[8] It is startling to hear a writer of Wright's achievement speak so despairingly of his own people. Feeling this way, he cut himself off entirely from the cultural component of his ethnicity.

In the early 1950's there was a strong reaction among black writers against protest fiction. The work of Ralph Ellison, William Demby, James Baldwin, and a few others marked the turning point. In their work, the outsider

component ceased to dominate for the first time. It did not disappear, nor could it realistically. But it no longer defined the substance and form of their work.

Of all the factors that contributed to this change, the most important must be the new sense of self-acceptance these writers exhibited. They, like good writers before them, came to accept their culture as valid – as valid as any other. This was essential. Without genuine self-acceptance, it was impossible to do more than imitate others or protest one's condition. With it the perceptive writer could freely explore himself and his culture without limit. He could embrace and use the cultural component of his ethnicity as the natural source material of his art. This did not mean that he could no longer protest, nor did it mean that he was obligated to write exclusively about his culture. It simply meant he had nothing left to prove. For the black writer of the fifties and after to argue for the humanity of his people or the validity of his culture would be repetitive and demeaning. Those burdens had already been carried.

Involved in self-acceptance is the recognition of one's commonality with all of humanity. And as black writers have recognized this, the focus in their work has inevitably shifted from a strict concern with ethnicity itself to broader, more universal themes. These themes are still grounded in the specific cultural background of black life, but in the best fiction there is now an effort to universalize themes, to show the connections between black life and life in general. ***Invisible Man*** by Ralph Ellison is a case in point. In the manners, rituals, and life styles of black people, Ellison saw universal issues. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that he used Black American culture and life as a metaphor for the human condition. His hero struggles as a black to find an identity, but more deeply he struggles as a man to find meaning in a less than reasonable world. And the problem of outsidedness is as central to this novel as it is to Wright's ***Native Son***, but here it works on more than just a racial level. Ultimately it is shown to be part of the experience of all men.

Ellison meticulously universalizes his hero's struggle. The novel is framed and focused by mythic themes that give the experience of this young black American a continuity with the classic stories of man's struggle. One of these is the journey motif – the symbolic journey from innocence to self knowledge. As in Homer's classic journey fable, ***The Odyssey***, the development of ***Invisible Man*** is episodic, each episode representing an island with certain challenges to be overcome and lessons to be learned. The invisible man begins his journey with the innocent belief that he is visible, that the world will see and appreciate his individuality. However, the episodes he lives through quickly reveal otherwise. In one, he is thrown out of college for essentially being honest with one of the school's wealthy white patrons. He obeys the man's request and introduces him to a poor black share cropper who has impregnated both his wife and daughter. Dr. Bledsoe, the black college president, is embarrassed by the incident and throws the invisible man out of school without hesitation and without the slightest regard for his

individuality. After several other equally humiliating episodes, the invisible man not only understands that he is invisible, but also that invisibility, used consciously, can afford him the freedom to maneuver his life along lines of his own choosing. His journey, which began in innocence, led to a deeper understanding of himself and his relationship to the world. Race was only one of the individual variables in this timeless journey. In case the reader mistakenly sees the novel as relating only to the black experience, Ellison has the narrator say in the last line of the novel: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"[9]

Ellison also saw in the traditional forms of black culture themes that were commonly associated with contemporary western culture. A particularly interesting example of this is the connection he makes in ***Invisible Man*** between the blues and existentialism. Ellison has written extensively and perceptively on the blues and there can be little doubt that his understanding of them has been very important in his fiction. The blues, as he defines them, are, "... a autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophes expressed lyrically."[10] The blues are a personal confrontation with one's own pain. Their purpose is to explore the most painful "episodes of a brutal experience" and "to transcend ... by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."[11] This, of course, is exactly what ***Invisible Man*** strives to do. The hero, who is writing (singing) about his life from an underground room, unflinchingly explores the most humiliating episodes of his life. One could also show that he very often achieves a "near tragic, near-comic lyricism."

However, what is important from the existential point of view is the matter of transcendence. By transforming his pain into lyricism, into art, the blues singer essentially redefines and, thereby, transcends his pain. He makes it manageable. This act of redefinition and transcendence, in the terminology of contemporary western thought, is existential. It involves the individual making meaning for himself against a backdrop of meaninglessness. Through a study of the blues, Ellison identifies a point where an indigenous black American art form intersects with one of the most well-known ideas in modern western thought. In the end the invisible man comes to the conclusion that "... the mind that has conceived a plan for living must never loose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived."[12] It is an existential insight, calling for the individual to make his own plan of living against the chaos in which he exists. But the insight comes not from the philosophy of existentialism, but only after the long, meticulous, blues-like probing of his own pain. By looking at the traditions of his own culture, by bearing down on them until their essences were revealed, Ellison was able to show their commonality with the thoughts and world views of other men. Only his willingness to go beyond the outsider component of his ethnicity and to look seriously at his own culture made it possible for him to discover both the uniqueness and the universality of black life.

Since Ellison, most of the serious black fiction authors have chosen to write from the cultural component rather than the outsider component.

which means they have looked at black life directly rather than exclusively through the prism of black-white racial conflict. Generally, they explore and examine, rather than polemicize or advocate. A large group of these writers began to emerge in the late sixties and early seventies. Some of them are: Alice Walker, Ernest Gaines, James Alan McPherson, Barry Beckham, John Wideman, Ishmael Reed, Al Young, and Toni Morrison. I will briefly discuss two, Toni Morrison and Al Young, who, I think, are representative.

Toni Morrison's second novel, ***Sula***, is, on one level, a study of how a small black community in rural Ohio deals with evil. Evil is personified in the novel's main character, Sula, who grows from childhood to womanhood in the course of the novel and who is, throughout her life, a source of pain and death to those around her. Sula's evil is born of her indifference to life. She dies in bed in the middle of a yawn and leads what the author calls an "experimental life," tampering with herself and others merely to see what will happen.[13] She both gives and takes pain with equal ease. In one scene she cuts off the tip of her finger to stop a group of white boys from molesting her and her girl friend Nel on the way home from school. "If I can do this to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?"[14] Another time she watches with detached fascination as her mother's dress catches on fire and burns her to death. "I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing."[15] In this same spirit of cold experimentation, she and Nel indifferently throw a young neighbor boy into a river and watch him drown. Years later, after they are adults, Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, though she does not love him, and ruins the marriage. Nothing is sacred for Sula and she is utterly without fear. The small black community in which she lives comes to see her as evil. Her return to the community after a long absence is preceded by a destructive plague of robins that the people take as an omen of connection with the devil.

As the novel develops, a tension is set up between Sula and the community. She sleeps freely with several of the husbands, puts her grandmother out of the house she has lived in all her life. And there are always the rumors, some true, some not, about her mother's death and the strange birth mark on her face. How will they deal with her? Will she leave? Will she be forced out? The answer is that nothing is done. She stays and no one presumes to tell her not to. The community accepts her presence as inevitable. As the narrator says, "The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over."[16] There is no naive belief that evil can somehow be removed from the community or from life. In fact, the presence of evil binds them together and urges them, in a negative way, to be more responsible people. "Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst."[17]

One of Morrison's goals in this novel is to show the particular way black people have traditionally handled a problem that is common to all. To oversimplify, her point is that blacks have realized that evil is an inevitable part of life that has to be lived with. Underlying this acceptance of evil is the quality of endurance. Ultimately, the novel is a celebration of this quality. In the end, long after Sula is dead, several members of the community are killed in a freak accident at a construction site where they go to protest the construction company's racist hiring policies. For this small black community, it is a holocaust that touches several families. It is the same indifferent, capricious, god-like evil of Sula magnified ten times. The community is devastated. But Morrison immediately shifts the scene several years into the future, and we see that the community has not only endured but is also thriving. We see blacks working in dime stores and banks – jobs they could never have had before. The evil of the past has been survived. The suffering blacks have endured has robbed them of illusion. Life is what it is, Morrison seems to be saying. There is no way to run from it.

The work of Al Young reflects the same self-acceptance. His most recent novel, ***Sitting Pretty***, revolves around a character, Sidney J. Prettymon, who is a kind of antihero. Sitting Pretty, as he is called, is a fifty-five year old homespun philosopher who lives in the transient Blue Jay Hotel, has over two hundred unpaid parking tickets and very little else to show for his struggle in life. Only his adult children from a marriage he walked out on give him anything tangible to be proud of. The son, Aristotle, has become a very competent lawyer, and the daughter, Cornelia, has married well and given him two grandchildren. In the year of his life that the novel covers, Sitting Pretty is in the middle of a late middle-age crisis in which he is trying to come to terms with his life and decide how to go on. He cuts down on his wine habit, gets a job and keeps it, serves weekend time in jail to pay off the parking tickets and makes a concerted effort to re-establish ties with his children and his former wife, who is suffering from cancer.

Sitting Pretty is a kind of black American Everyman, a common man with human weaknesses but also with the heart to struggle against the confusion in society and within himself. As he says, ". . . all of us goin down slow . . . But I keep tryna move on."[10] The novel is clearly a celebration of this character who Young sees as representative of what might be called a black silent majority – the middle-aged blacks who came along before the sixties, whose lifestyle was never glorified or vilified in the media, who were too busy working to be involved in political movements, who simply lived an unnoticed life of struggle. The most persistent quality in Sitting Pretty's character is the human compassion his own struggle in life has bred into him. In one scene he and a friend end up in the apartment of two white girls after a night of carousing in San Francisco. Worried about his former wife's cancer, Sitting Pretty ignores the girls and falls asleep while his friend makes noisy love in the next room. But just as he falls asleep, the other girl slips into his bed and says she is lonely. She doesn't want to make love (she is in her

period), but only wants him to hold her. Though it is difficult, he accommodates. ". . . It's times when people – and more especially strangers – need to touch in a way that aint got much to do with gettin in one nother's pants. Sometimes all you need is a taste of that easy, simple kinda contact that help you blot out – for a few hours anyway – how painful the stupid world is."[19] Normally there would be irony in this brief encounter – the oppressed old black man consoling the young privileged daughter of his oppressor. But the irony is mitigated by their common human need and by the compassion that allows Sitting Pretty to see that common need. Again, Young is celebrating this quality in Sitting Pretty and, through him, in that much overlooked generation of blacks whose fundamental humaneness has often been falsely called Uncle Tomism.

It is acceptance of his culture as a valid and complete expression of the human condition that makes it possible for Young to discover the material and themes of this novel. It allows him to look beyond the outsidedness of the black experience.

I do not mean in this paper to condemn black writing dominated by the outsider component of ethnicity. There are obvious social realities that made the development of this literature necessary and inevitable. My point is only that the outsider component is not a sufficient focus to support a broad and varied cultural literature. After a time, even though the social causes for its existence may be only slightly mitigated, outsidedness, as a literary focus, tends to circle in on itself and become tiredly one dimensional. Literature must evolve or it dies. The black writer must finally "sing" despite his blackness; he must see his humanity despite those who do not. I believe the most recent generation of black writers is doing just this.

Notes

[1] Countee Cullen, "Yet Do I Marvel," in *Black Voices*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: Mentor Books, 1968), p. 383.

[2] Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 20.

[3] Charles Chesnutt, *The House Behind the Cedars* (New York: Collier Books, 1969, reprint), p. 60.

[4] Bone, p. 56.

[5] Claude McKay, *Banjo* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1929), p. 326.

[6] McKay, p. 324.

[7] Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper and Row, 1940), p. xxxiii.

[8] Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), p. 45.

[9] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972 reprint; 1952), p. 439.

[10] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York: Signet Books, 1966), p. 90.

[11] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 90.

[12] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 438.

[13] Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), p. 118.

[14] Morrison, p. 55.

[15] Ibid., p. 147.

[16] Ibid., p. 118.

[17] Ibid., p. 117.

[18] Al Young, *Sitting Pretty* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), p. 30.

[19] Young, p. 150.